

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Witness Statement

Testimony of Congressman Ray LaHood Before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands Tuesday, March 14, 2000 *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before your committee today on an issue that is very important to me, and to the 18th District of Illinois -- authorization of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

A panel of world-famous historians recently voted Abraham Lincoln as the greatest American President. This comes as no surprise to those of us from the Land of Lincoln. For decades, people from all over the world have come to Illinois to learn about our 16th President, and to be inspired by his life and words. Lincoln's story is the quintessential American success story. In Lincoln, we have a man born into the most humble of circumstances overcoming hardship and repeated failures, through his own hard work and dedication, to emerge as one of the three most written about individuals in human history.

But even though Lincoln is considered by the world to be one of our nation's greatest leaders, there is no single location where the Lincoln story can be told. There are sites that interpret his pioneer days, his legal and political careers, his home life, and even his death. But there is not a facility dedicated to interpreting Abraham Lincoln's legacy and relevance to contemporary generations.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of the nation's most respected historians, recently termed it a "tragedy" that Abraham Lincoln does not have a Presidential Library.

The State of Illinois has the world's largest Lincoln collection -- some 46,000 items so rare and valuable that the collection exceeds the combined Lincoln holdings of the National Park Service, the National Archives, and the Smithsonian Institution. Some of our nation's most significant artifacts are a part of that collection. The Gettysburg Address sets the stage for our country's history after the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation echoed Lincoln's strong feelings against human bondage. Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, advocating malice toward none and charity for all, predicted benevolent policies for post war recovery. The Illinois collection includes such diverse artifacts as Tad Lincoln's toy cannon, Mary Lincoln's wedding skirt, and the nameplate from the front door of Lincoln's Springfield house -- treasures that belong to all Americans.

But few of you have ever seen these items, and there is a reason for that. The State of Illinois has no adequate facilities to appropriately display and interpret these items. They are kept locked in a vault beneath the Old State Capitol in downtown Springfield, to be brought out only for important research or the

occasional exhibit at another location.

Abraham Lincoln's example of sacrifice for his ideals should not be kept locked behind a vault door. Lincoln's message of freedom and democracy should not be kept in obscurity in the basement of a building. The life of America's greatest President should not be hidden away from all but a select few.

The proposed Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library will be a beacon of freedom for the entire world. Anyone enjoying the benefits of democracy, and those who yearn to enjoy those benefits, will want to come to this new facility. The world looks to Abraham Lincoln as the highest example of freedom in a nation founded on that concept, and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library will give the world a place to learn about, and be inspired by, that example.

Abraham Lincoln's message is especially relevant today, as the world's changing political situation has people searching for a champion of freedom and quality. We have that champion. He is an American who kept the United States united and demonstrated to the world that democratic ideals were not a mere abstraction, but a living reality. He is a human being who brought dignity to all human beings.

He is a martyr who died for his beliefs. He makes us proud to be Americans. Now, it's time to return the favor.

Abraham Lincoln's legacy belongs to all generations. His appeal transcends age, race, gender, class and partisan boundaries. He is one of our greatest Presidents and deserves this long overdue facility in his honor. It will be located in Springfield, Illinois, but will be open to the world. Let's keep Lincoln's torch of freedom burning for all people. Let's help fund the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Thank you.

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